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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by the World Veterans Federation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Statement

As an international organization of associations of war veterans and war victims, and most recently, former peacekeepers, the WVF continues to be a dedicated advocate for the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On an international level, the WVF works with the United Nations and its agencies, other non-governmental organizations, in coalitions and other international entities, and governments, for these principles for all peoples, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or gender. Member associations are active within their countries and regions on behalf of peace, equality and justice, extending WVF objectives and policies into national venues.

Appropriately, the Commission this year reviews the implementation of the Platform for Action (adopted by the Beijing Conference in 1995), and the outcome documents from the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly, ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. It is timely that the Committee also will seek to identify current challenges and develop new strategies to meet them.

Women and armed conflict Representing civilian victims of war as well as war veterans, the WVF became aware that armed conflicts have disastrous impacts and consequences for women as well as men, particularly since 90% of the casualties of modern conflicts are women and children. In 1984, the WVF created a Standing Committee on Women to study the situation and provide a voice for women in war, and to develop an active partnership between the men and women who experienced war in different ways, which would further the goals of the organization on behalf of equality, justice and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. In the 1980s and 1990s, WVF sought to bring international attention to the difficult situation of civilian women, including refugees, caught in armed conflicts. We were pleased that the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 identified " **women and armed conflict"** as one of the twelve critical areas of concern in its **Platform for Action.**

Human Rights Advocate WVF recognized that the sufferings and abuse of women war victims stemmed from their second-class status and denial of their human rights. This led WVF, a strong human rights advocate, to espouse the cause of women's human rights on behalf of all those who suffer abuse and exploitation because of the denial of their human rights. In 1992, in its statement to the UNCSW, WVF urged that the status of women war victims and war veterans be included among its concerns, arguing that the drive for equality and elimination of discrimination against women goes hand in hand with the protection of their human rights. The WVF presentation to the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 called for a **reaffirmation of the universality of human rights** and stated that **"women's rights are an integral part of human rights and should not be defined according to a different moral norm or modified for cultural or religious reasons."** Over the years, WVF consistently has supported the universality of human rights and the CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and protocols, conventions, and UN conferences affecting women's interests such as development, environment, mines removal, small arms and disarmament initiatives.

WVF concurs with the Final Outcome Document (23rd special session of the GA, 2000) that "***Peace is inextricably linked to equality between women and men and development... The targeting of civilians, including women and children, the displacement of people, and the recruitment of child soldiers in violation of national or international law, by state and/or non-state actors, which occur in armed conflicts, have had a particular adverse impact on gender equality and women's human rights***"

Rape as A War Crime Rape and other sexual violence against women during armed conflicts has always been looked at as a regrettable part of war. Even the war crimes trials of Nuremberg and Tokyo did not prosecute such crimes. The prevalence of rape in current conflicts continues as an abomination. WVF unequivocally condemns rape as a weapon of war, and urges that it be declared a war crime. For many years, WVF has been a passionate advocate for the creation of a permanent International Criminal Court to prosecute war crimes. Alone and as a member of NGO coalitions, WVF used its influence to persuade governments to sign on to the Statute of the Court. Furthermore, it has urged that gender-related crimes be included as war crimes or crimes against humanity and that strong penalties be enacted for all acts of sexual and other violence against women during wartime. Such action would end the impunity that perpetrators of such crimes have enjoyed in the past. Not only does the Court exist now, but the international tribunals for Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda

have successfully prosecuted war crimes of rape. In 1993, the WVF's Standing Committee on Women presented a well-received seminar on rape in cooperation with the Turkish veterans group in Istanbul, and also testified before UN Experts Groups.

Comfort Women WVF was one of the first organizations to call attention to the tragic situation of the 'comfort women' of World War II, the hundreds of thousands of mostly Asian women who were captured by the Japanese Army, and with the support of the government, forced into sexual slavery until the war ended. These crimes were never prosecuted, but were unknown since the traumatized survivors did not speak out. WVF at its 1997 General Assembly in Seoul "*condemned all violations of the human rights of women in situations of armed conflict...*" and called upon all countries, international agencies and NGOs "*to eliminate the violation of the rights of women in war time, emphasizing the need for appropriate systems and special compensation for the victims.*" As the surviving 'comfort women' seek an official apology and modest reparations from the Japanese government, WVF continues to support these victims of war.

Post-War Reintegration The rehabilitation and reintegration of those affected by armed conflicts, including civilian victims of war (women and children), is another important concern of the WVF. To help national governments provide appropriate assistance for these victims, WVF has developed a comprehensive manual "*Guidelines to Basic Rights for War Veterans and Victims of War*" which was presented to the follow-up conference of the World Summit for Social Development in 1998. Also, the WVF has organized six international conferences on legislation to facilitate the actions needed by governments to assist veterans and civilian victims in their rehabilitation. While responsibility for assistance for returning combatants is often recognized by governments, that sense of debt does not extend to the civilian victims of war – mostly women and children - whose lives were equally disrupted and damaged. Hence little attention has been given to developing strategies for the rehabilitation and reintegration of civilian victims of armed conflicts.

Among the most traumatized civilian victims of war (in the millions) are refugee and displaced women who suffer incredible violence and deprivation all along their route of flight, often from those who are supposed to assist them. The plight of these women received special attention from the WVF, including working with the UNHCR to develop guidelines for gender-sensitive treatment by field staff. The WVF Committee on Women took leadership roles in organizing Working Groups and coalitions, arranging workshops at UN NGO meetings, and providing advocacy for women displaced by armed conflicts. A resolution passed by WVF in 2000 calling for assistance for victims of violence, "*considers it important that returning refugees receive the necessary protection as well as the help they need in order to be able to build up their lives in destroyed areas...*"

Children in Peril Deeply concerned about the fate of children in armed conflicts, WVF hailed the Machel Report on the impact of armed conflict on children and called upon its members to urge their governments to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol to outlaw the recruitment of children under 18 to serve in armed forces and insurgent and militia groups. WVF is a member of the Coalition on Child Soldiers, and has strongly supported the work of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on this searing issue. WVF participated actively in the three Preparatory meetings and the General Assembly Special Session on Children (May 2002) to insure that the Final Outcome Document emphasizes that children caught in armed conflicts will need extensive services and support, including education, health care and counseling, after the conflicts end.

Women in Peace Processes When the Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 in October, 2000, new possibilities were opened for women to become active participants in all aspects of peace negotiations, conflict resolution, peace making and in the key steps of rebuilding war-torn societies. Secretary-General Annan told the Council: "...**the organization was created to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. It also proclaims the equal rights of men and women. We must live up to both challenges, or we shall not succeed fully in either... women, who know the price of conflict so well, are also often better equipped than men to prevent or resolve it. And yet the potential contribution of women to peace and security remains severely undervalued. You recognized that peace inextricably is linked to equality between women and men. And you declared that maintaining and promoting peace and security requires women's equal participation in decision making...**"

We were pleased that the Commission made the principles of Resolution 1325 one of its themes of its 48th meeting in 2004. From background studies and 'aides memoires', it became clear that in most peace negotiations and in the

process of restoring a post-war society, unless women are involved, women's concerns are not considered. Those initiating post-war reconstruction strategies rarely take into account the trauma and suffering of the civilian women; hence, they are left out of rehabilitation and reconstruction initiatives. If women are involved early on in the peace process, especially in writing the peace agreement or a new constitution, their interests will be considered and be part of the agenda.

History has taught us that reconstructed societies may emerge that may or may not improve the status of women and their human rights. Unless there is careful planning, old inequalities will persist, or even increase. When a new constitution was being written for Afghanistan recently, it was crucial that there was input from women and their advocates to enshrine women's legal rights. If those rights were not included from the outset, women's future roles in that country would have been circumscribed, with little hope of future redress.

Old and New Challenges: As the Commission deliberates in its 49th session, it embarks on a heavy programme of work, including reviewing national reports and questionnaires to get a picture of how the old challenges enunciated in the **Platform for Action** have been met. Probably progress can be seen in many areas, but from the perspective of women and human rights advocates, there are many old challenges which are still far from their goals. And there are new challenges. Resolution 1325 is one of them. Most important - it presents a window of opportunity for women to be part of the decision-making process in crucial stages of reconstituting a war-torn society. Such opportunities do not come frequently, so advantage much be taken of it.

Why a Fifth World Conference There have been calls for a Fifth World Conference on Women, to be held sometime before 2010. Resolution 1325 is one recent challenge that needs to be acted upon quickly. Only a world conference commands the kind of public and media attention – which draws in celebrities and leaders from all walks of life – to the issues and challenges that are needed. Many of the challenges would benefit from a fresh approach – a 'jump start' that might stimulate new ideas. Recent world events, man-made and natural disasters, reinforce this timely suggestion. For example, the recent Tsunami which left thousands of women and children survivors prey to violence, rape and exploitation, without institutional remedies, demonstrates the urgent need for a massive infusion of will and energy by the international community to advance the status of women. We hope that this Commission meeting will support the suggestion for convening a Fifth World Conference on Women so that the mechanisms for the UN holding such a conference will soon be put in place.